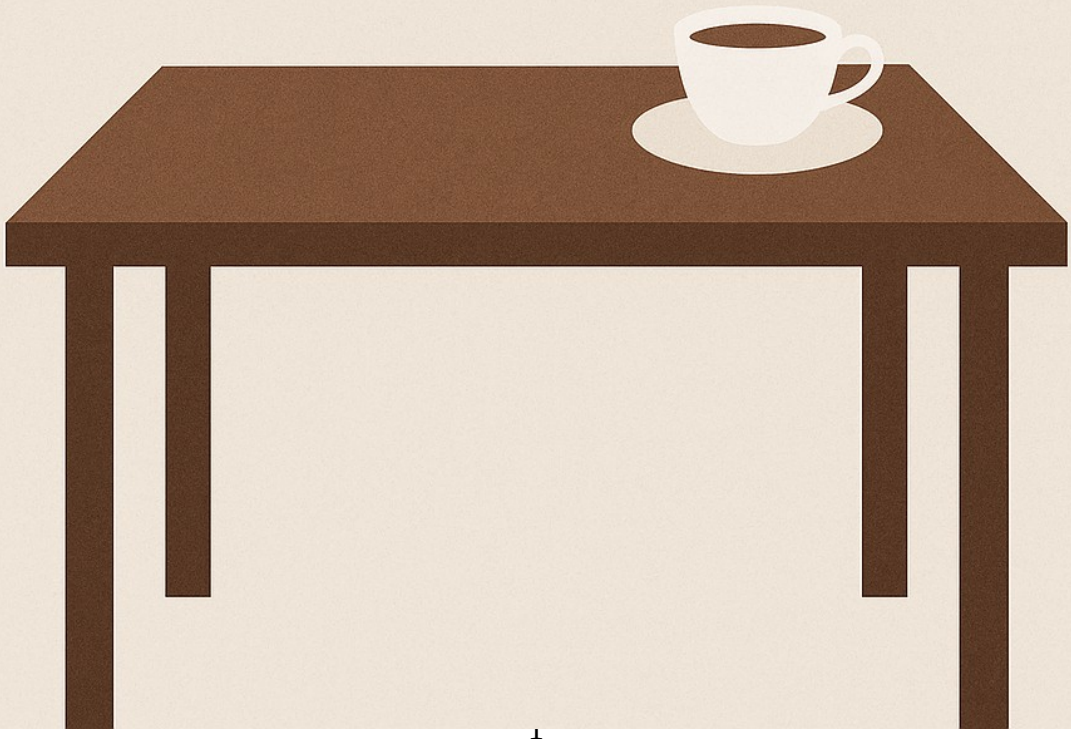
THE HOUSE SHE WALKED INTO

EK NOOR



THE HOUSE SHE WALKED INTO

by Ek Noor

Dedicated to all who choose their own path.

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Characters

SINDY - Late 50s. A traditional mother, protective and proud, upholding family order above all.

RAJ - Early 30s. SINDY's son, gentle and torn between love and loyalty.

SONIA - Late 20s to early 30s. RAJ's wife, independent and intelligent, owner of several chemist shops.

KAM - Late 50s. SINDY's long-time friend, sharp-tongued and rooted in old customs.

Beta is are term of endearment like "dear" or "my love".

ACT I: THE TABLE OF TRADITION

SCENE 1 - THE TABLE OF TRADITIONS

At the dining table of SINDY's house. Tea set on the table. Having afternoon tea.

KAM: Did you hear about Devi's daughter-in-law?

SINDY: *(pours tea)* Hmm. Walked out, didn't she? Poor Devi…

KAM: Not poor. Foolish! Should've kept that girl in check. Too much freedom spoils them.

(pause)

SINDY: RAJ says he's found someone.

KAM: *(interested)* Oh? From our community?

SINDY: *(hesitates)* Originally from Bihar,… and not our religion.

KAM: *(sharp intake)* Bihar! And not one of us? SINDY, what's he thinking?

SINDY: He says she's kind. Hard working. Owns a chemist shop.

KAM: Chemist shop? Hmm. That means independence. You'll need to manage that carefully.

KAM: Thirty's the cut-off point. You can't risk him staying single.

SINDY: I know. She's a good girl, I think… But what if she doesn't fit?

KAM: Then you make her fit. Start with religion. Our way, our house.

SINDY: *(uncertain)* She'll have to agree.

KAM: Not agree. Obey. You're the mother. You must keep the reins.

SINDY: *(quietly)* RAJ loves her. He said that word...love. You know how that word frightens me.

KAM: Love passes. Duty remains.

SINDY: But she's clever. Educated. I don't want him to be lonely either.

KAM: Clever women must be guided, not indulged. Remember Devi? Let her daughter-in-law run wild...*(nods)* now the whole community laughs at her.

SINDY: *(pouring the last of the tea)* So, control. But gently.

KAM: Gently at first. They all smile before they bite.

SINDY: *(to herself, almost trembling)* I only want him happy.

KAM: Then keep her close, SINDY. Happiness wanders when wives forget their place.

SCENE 2 – THE VISIT

At the dining table, with the tea set. SINDY is setting the cups and saucers. RAJ and SONIA enter the room.

RAJ: Mum...this is SONIA.

SINDY: *(warm smile, eyes assessing)* You're even prettier than he said. Come in, beta. Sit.

(SONIA offers a respectful nod, takes a seat.)

SONIA: Thank you for inviting me, Aunty.

SINDY: Aunty*?* Soon you'll be calling me Mum. *(SINDY smiles.)*

(RAJ laughs and SONIA blushes slightly.)

RAJ: See? She's already nervous.

(SINDY serves tea.)

SINDY: RAJ tells me you run a Chemist shop?

SONIA: Yes. I started it after uni. Small shop at first...now a few branches.

SINDY: *(admiring but cautious)* Ambitious. That's good… as long as business doesn't come before family.

(A pause. SONIA's smile falters just slightly.)

SONIA: Of course not. Family is important.

RAJ: *(quickly)* She even said she'd like to help with our charity events.

SINDY: That's lovely. And you're from… Bihar, yes?

SONIA: *(careful)* Yes, originally from Patna.

SINDY: Different traditions there, I hear.

RAJ: (lightly) Mum…

SINDY: I'm just saying. Every house has its rhythm.

SONIA: Yes, of course...

SINDY: Good. RAJ will guide you.

(She touches RAJ's arm, proud but proprietary.)

(Awkward pause. RAJ senses tension and tries to lighten it.)

RAJ: Mum's just protective. You know how she is.

SINDY: *(smiles)* A mother only protects what she loves.

(The moment softens; SONIA nods politely. RAJ relaxes.)

SINDY: *(handing SONIA a sweet)* Here...have a ladoo. Homemade.

SONIA: Thank you.

SINDY: It's our tradition to share something sweet when life changes.

(SONIA eats, smiles.)

SONIA: It's delicious.

SINDY: Good. Then you'll remember the taste.

(Slightly loaded beat. SONIA doesn't yet realise the significance. RAJ misses it too.)

RAJ: See, Mum? She fits right in.

SINDY: *(quietly, to herself)* We'll make sure she does.

Lights fade as SINDY clears the cups. RAJ and SONIA keep chatting.

SCENE 3 – ADVICE OVER TEA

At the dining table. A few days later.

KAM: So, you've met her. What's the verdict?

SINDY: *(hesitant)* She's… polite. Pretty. Speaks well. Maybe too well.

KAM: Too well?

SINDY: She has opinions. About everything. Business, faith, even how to make dhal.

KAM: *(snorts)* Opinions don't feed a family. They feed trouble.

(They sip tea. A pause.)

SINDY: But RAJ was glowing. I haven't seen him smile like that in years.

KAM: *(leans in)* That's how they get you. Charm first, change later.

SINDY: She's not unkind, KAM. She called me Mum.

KAM: Mum today, Madam tomorrow. Remember Devi? She said the same about her daughter-in-law. The girl smiled, then left.

SINDY: *(uneasy)* You always bring up Devi.

KAM: Because she's proof, SINDY. Proof of what happens when a mother loosens her grip.

(SINDY looks unsettled.)

SINDY: RAJ says love doesn't care about religion.

KAM: Love cares when people whisper behind your back in the community. You want that? You want them saying, “SINDY’s son married a girl, and changed nothing”?

SINDY: *(quietly)* I don’t want shame.

KAM: Then keep your house straight.

SINDY: *(after a beat)* She’ll have to take our faith. Slowly, kindly… RAJ needn’t know I’m behind it.

KAM: That’s the spirit. Teach her the prayers, the dress. Bit by bit.

(KAM stirs her tea, satisfied. SINDY watches the spoon spin, conflicted.)

SINDY: *(softly)* She looked so happy when she said “family.” I almost believed her.

KAM: Believe her, but guide her. Don’t lose what’s yours.

(A beat. SINDY looks down at the tea.)

SINDY: Sometimes I wonder if I’m guiding… or guarding.

KAM: Same thing, isn’t it?

SINDY: *(softly)* I used to think so.

(Silence... SINDY forces a smile, pours more tea.)

SINDY: Another cup?

KAM: Always.

Lights fade slowly….

SCENE 4 – THE NEW BRIDE

RAJ and SONIA enter, laughing softly

SINDY: My travellers are home! *(embraces RAJ, then SONIA)* So thin already, honeymoon food wasn't good?

RAJ: *(Laughs)* Too much adventure, not enough roti.

SONIA: And no one to remind him to take his vitamins.

SINDY: Ah, the chemist speaks! You can't stop being one, can you?

(Everyone laughs. SINDY pours tea.)

SINDY: So, the wedding ceremony was beautiful. I watched the video again, your head covered, your eyes so calm.

SONIA: It felt right. Peaceful. I wanted to understand before I took the step. I read the first verse in translation every night.

SINDY: Good girl. One path, one language of prayer, that keeps a home pure.

RAJ: *(Mild)* Mum, she just got home. Give her a moment.

SINDY: Moments pass, habits stay. *(places the small prayer book wrapped in a silk scarf before SONIA)* Start tomorrow morning. I'll help you.

(SONIA nods politely, then brightens.)

SONIA: Mum, I was thinking of checking on the shops next week, just a few hours a day to settle things.

SINDY: *(pleasant but firm)* Beta, the first month after marriage sets a woman’s rhythm. Business can wait. Home first, then work.

RAJ: We’ll see how busy things get.

SINDY: *(softly)* Your father worked all his life. A man’s success needs a steady home behind it.

(SONIA smiles, quiet.)

SONIA: In my shops, I tell patients health needs balance, too much rest can make you weak.

SINDY: *(smiling tightly)* Then rest your ambition for a while and grow strong in faith.

(A small pause. RAJ reaches for her hand, oblivious to the tension.)

RAJ: She’s right about balance, Mum. Maybe SONIA can manage both.

SINDY: *(placing her hand over his)* Let’s not rush. Every house has its order. We’ll show her ours.

(SONIA glances away. Her face is calm but pensive.)

SONIA: Every order needs a little fresh air, doesn’t it?

SINDY: *(pleasantly)* Plenty of fresh air here, if the windows stay clean.

Lights fade.

ACT II: MONEY AND POWER

SCENE 1 - MORNING BALANCE

Six months later. Early morning at the dining table. SINDY is going through bills. SONIA enters with her handbag, folder and car keys.

SINDY: *(without looking up)* Off so early again?

SONIA: Deliveries today. New stock coming in for all three shops.

SINDY: *(glancing at her)* Three? You make it sound like a company empire.

SONIA: *(lightly)* Maybe one day. For now, just long hours and late nights.

(SINDY sets the papers down, gestures to the chair beside her.)

SINDY: Sit for a minute. Have tea before you rush away.

(SONIA sits, polite but restless. SINDY pours tea for her.)

SINDY: You've done well, SONIA. Really. Not everyone can run businesses and a house. I tell KAM, "My daughter-in-law earns more than my son!"

SONIA: *(smiles)* I don't think RAJ minds.

SINDY: Men never say they mind. But it eats at them.

(SONIA's smile fades a little. SINDY stirs her tea slowly.)

SINDY: You’ve got good sense with money. That’s clear. But too much responsibility on one person isn’t healthy.

SONIA: *(careful)* What do you mean?

SINDY: Joint accounts, beta. That’s what makes a marriage strong. One purse, one path. RAJ should help with the business side. He’s family...and family protects family.

SONIA: *(quietly)* He’s not trained for it. I’ve always handled the accounts.

SINDY: And you do it well. But you’ll sleep better if RAJ shares the burden. You shouldn’t have to worry about so much.

SONIA: *(a small pause)* I don’t worry. I plan.

SINDY: *(smiling)* Same thing, just younger words.

(A short silence. SINDY pushes a small pile of bills toward her.)

SINDY: These came yesterday. Household expenses. RAJ was saying maybe you could take over paying them...since you’re already managing so well.

SONIA: *(surprised)* Me? I thought RAJ was handling house bills.

SINDY: He does enough. You’re so organised...just a few standing orders from your account. Later, he’ll reimburse.

SONIA: *(steady)* That’s not quite the same as sharing.

SINDY: *(warmly)* It’s the same in spirit. We’re one family. What’s mine is yours...and what’s yours is ours.

(SONIA nods slowly, half-smiling, but something unsettles her. She stands, lifts her handbag.)

SONIA: I'll think about it.

SINDY: *(pleasantly)* Think quickly, beta. Delays make people nervous.

(SONIA turns toward the door. SINDY's tone stays sweet.)

SINDY: And drive carefully. Success makes people careless.

(SONIA pauses, half-turns back.)

SONIA: I'm careful with everything, Mum. That's how things stay standing.

(SONIA exits, taking her bag and keys, forgetting the folder. SINDY watches her go, then looks at the table...the scattered bills and the folder. She gathers them in a neat pile, taps them flat, satisfied.)

SCENE 2 - GOOD ADVICE

Later that day, SINDY sits at the table, looking through the pile of bills. RAJ enters, takes the jacket off, loosens his tie.

RAJ: *(cheerful)* Mum! You're still doing battle with the gas company?

SINDY: *(without looking up)* They're robbers, I swear. Everything costs double.

RAJ: *(kisses her head lightly)* Don't worry. I'll check the account later.

SINDY: *(smiles faintly)* SONIA already said that.

RAJ: *(sitting)* She told you she'd handle it?

SINDY: Mmm. She means well. But she's too trusting. People take advantage of busy women.

RAJ: She's not that busy. She just likes doing things properly.

SINDY: *(leans forward)* Properly is one thing. Independently is another. You're her husband, RAJ... not her tenant.

(RAJ frowns slightly, picking up the calculator.)

RAJ: Mum, what's this about?

SINDY: Nothing. Just… you should keep an eye. She moves money fast... business, suppliers, rent, staff. One mistake and it'll land on your shoulders too.

RAJ: *(calm)* She's good at what she does. You saw how much she earned last quarter.

SINDY: Exactly. So much. That's what worries me.

(Beat.)

SINDY: When a woman earns that much, people start whispering that her husband lives on her money. I can hear it already at the temple.

RAJ: *(uneasy)* Let them whisper. We know the truth.

SINDY: *(softly)* Truth doesn't matter when pride is wounded.

(RAJ sits back, thinking. SINDY pours him tea, gentle but relentless.)

SINDY: You work hard, RAJ. Don't let the world think you've given up the head of the table.

RAJ: *(half-smile)* You've kept that head seat for twenty years.

SINDY: And look how stable this house is. A man leads, a woman supports. That's balance.

(RAJ sips tea silently.)

SINDY: I'm not saying take over her business... just be aware. Make sure her profits, her accounts… all sit safely under one roof. Yours.

RAJ: (*hesitant)* We already share the home. Isn't that enough?

SINDY: *(smiles)* Home follows money, beta. It always has.

(She pats his hand affectionately.)

SINDY: You're not taking from her. You're protecting her. From herself, from mistakes, from talk.

RAJ: *(quietly)* She won't like it.

SINDY: She'll thank you later. No woman minds giving up control... not if she feels loved.

(Silence. RAJ looks at the bills. SINDY sits back, satisfied she's planted the seed.)

RAJ: *(after a pause)* Maybe I'll look through her business accounts...just to understand.

SINDY: *(smiling warmly)* Good. That's all I'm saying...understand. Knowledge keeps families strong.

(SINDY clears the cold cups, as RAJ flips open a folder.)

SCENE 3 - FIGURES

Later that evening. SONIA walks into the dining room. RAJ looking through the folder. SINDY walks in with a tray with the tea set, puts it on the table and hovers.

SONIA: Everything all right?

RAJ: *(absently)* Just going through some statements.

SONIA: Statements? From the shop?

(SINDY looks up briefly, then back down.)

RAJ: You left the accounts folder here this morning. I was curious. Thought I'd see how you were doing.

SONIA: *(carefully)* How *we* were doing, you mean.

RAJ: *(smiles)* Yes, of course. We.

SONIA: Did I ask you to check?

(SINDY's voice cuts in, smooth as silk.)

SINDY: He's just helping, beta. No harm in a husband knowing how things run.

SONIA: *(sitting, calm)* I'm not hiding anything. But business isn't a family picnic. There's paperwork, suppliers...confidential things.

RAJ: *(mild)* I’m not a stranger, SONIA.

SONIA: No. But you didn’t tell me.

RAJ: I didn’t think it was a big deal.

(Pause. SONIA looks at him, steady.)

SONIA: When people say that, it usually is.

(SINDY sits down.)

SINDY: You shouldn’t talk like that, beta. It sounds like mistrust.

SONIA: *(turning to her)* It sounds like a question.

(Short silence.)

RAJ: *(closing the folder)* Okay, maybe I should’ve asked first. But it’s just numbers. I’m trying to understand your side of things.

SONIA: *(softly)* Then sit beside me next time, not behind my back.

(RAJ hesitates; SINDY senses the tension and moves quickly to defuse it.)

SINDY: Enough for one night. You’re both tired. SONIA, come and sit and have some tea.

(RAJ, pour the tea for SONIA.)

(Neither moves at first. SONIA stands, then stops.)

SONIA: Mum, you once said family means trust. But trust isn't always shared...sometimes it's borrowed.

(SINDY feigns a laugh.)

SINDY: And sometimes it's repaid with interest, beta. You'll see.

SONIA: I already am.

(SONIA sits. RAJ stares at the folder, guilt flickering across his face. SINDY sits, humming lightly, pretending peace. Then starts poring the tea.)

SCENE 4 - SHARED ACCOUNTS

A few days later. In the dining room. Bills neatly stacked on the table. RAJ and SINDY checking their phones and sitting calmly. SONIA walks in with a supermarket carrier bag and places it on the table.

SONIA: Bread, milk, and your favourite biscuits.

RAJ: Perfect timing...I was starving.

SINDY: *(smiling)* See, beta, she remembers the little things. That's what keeps a home sweet.

(SONIA takes her coat off.)

SINDY: *(casually)* The bank called this morning. They're updating joint accounts. I thought we should make things tidy, combine everything under one. Less paperwork.

SONIA: *(lightly)* We already did that for the house bills.

SINDY: Mmm. But not for business. It's sensible, na? One umbrella.

RAJ: It might make taxes easier.

SONIA: Or confusion easier.

(A pause. SINDY's tone stays friendly.)

SINDY: You don't trust us?

SONIA: I didn't say that. I just keep business separate so suppliers aren't tangled with family money.

SINDY: *(sipping tea)* You sound like my accountant.

(Small laugh from RAJ, SONIA smiles thinly.)

SONIA: That's because I am one, of my own work.

(SINDY leans forward, voice gentle.)

SINDY: Look, beta. You're earning, we're all benefitting. Everyone says how lucky we are...daughter-in-law with shops! But people notice when a wife runs everything herself. It looks… proud.

RAJ: *(uneasy)* Mum…

SINDY: I'm only thinking long term. Suppose something happens...an audit, a delay...you'll blame RAJ for not helping. Let him take charge for a while.

SONIA: *(quietly)* "For a while" has a way of lasting.

(SINDY puts her phone down, patient.)

SINDY: You talk like we’re enemies. We’re family. No one’s taking from you, we’re protecting you.

RAJ: She just means structure, SONIA. That’s all.

SONIA: *(looking at him)* Whose structure?

(Silence. RAJ looks down. SINDY stands, starts clearing cups, humming softly.)

SINDY: We’ll go to the bank tomorrow. Simple signatures. After that, you can rest. No more stress.

(SONIA doesn’t move. SINDY exits to the kitchen. RAJ remains seated.)

SONIA: *(softly, to RAJ)* It’s not the paperwork that worries me. It’s the permission.

RAJ: *(tired)* She’s trying to help.

SONIA: *(shakes her head)* She’s trying to keep everything inside this house. Even me.

(RAJ looks at her, caught between love and habit. SONIA’s hand rests on the folder, the last thing that still feels like hers.)

ACT III: THE HOUSE SHE WALKED OUT OF

SCENE 1 - SIGNATURES

Late afternoon. At the dining table. SINDY scrolling at her phone. RAJ stretching his arms and legs. SONIA walks in. A single pen sits beside the folder.

SINDY: There you are. I was wondering if you'd forgotten the time.

SONIA: *(placing her bag down)* I went to the bank.

(SINDY glances at RAJ, surprised but keeps her tone even.)

SINDY: Oh? Without us?

SONIA: I had some accounts to sort before we made changes.

RAJ: *(gentle)* We said we'd go together.

SONIA: I know. I wanted to be prepared.

(SINDY gestures toward the folder.)

SINDY: Everything's ready. Just your signature. Then it's done. One family, one account.

SONIA: *(looks at the folder, then at SINDY)* Whose name first?

SINDY: RAJ's, of course. He's head of the household.

SONIA: *(sits slowly)* Then the house has changed heads since morning.

(SINDY freezes for a moment, smiles tightly.)

SINDY: Don't be dramatic, beta. It's a formality.

SONIA: That's how control always begins...as formality.

(RAJ steps closer, uneasy.)

RAJ: SONIA, please. Mum's trying to make life easier for all of us.

SONIA: *(softly)* Whose ease are we protecting? Hers, yours, or mine?

SINDY: *(snaps slightly, the first crack)* Everyone's. Families don't survive three bank cards and two minds.

SONIA: Then maybe the family's too small for my mind.

(Silence. RAJ looks at her, stunned. SINDY exhales sharply, then forces calm.)

SINDY: You think you're smarter because you earn. That's not how marriage works.

SONIA: *(quietly)* Marriage isn't a merger. It's trust with a roof. I just want the roof, not the contract.

(SONIA pushes the folder gently back across the table.)

RAJ: *(tired)* Why are you making this so hard?

SONIA: Because it's already hard, RAJ. You just didn't notice.

(SINDY turns away, muttering.)

SINDY: I gave you everything...this house, this family...

SONIA: You gave me walls, Mum. Beautiful ones. But still walls.

(A pause. The air feels heavy.)

RAJ: (softly) So what now?

SONIA: *(after a long breath)* I stopped the shops accounts change. They stay in my name. It's cleaner that way.

(SINDY whirls, voice shaking.)

SINDY: You did what?

SONIA: It's legal. And fair. You wanted everything under one roof. I decided which roof was mine.

(She stands, calm.)

SONIA: I'll hand over the house bills tomorrow. But the business stays with me. I built it. I keep it.

(RAJ opens his mouth to protest; she cuts him off gently.)

SONIA: I'm not leaving you, RAJ. But I won't live like I've already gone.

(SINDY sinks slowly into her chair, stunned. SONIA picks up her bag, ready to go out.)

SINDY: Where are you going?

SONIA: For fresh air.

(She walks toward the door, pauses, looks back at the table...the centre of every decision, every argument.)

SONIA: This house runs on balance sheets, Mum. But life doesn't.

(She exits. The light fades around the table until only SINDY remains, staring at the folder. RAJ stands behind her, unsure which side he's on.)

SCENE 2 - THE EMPTY TABLE

In the morning, three cups are on the table, one cup untouched. No folder.

(SINDY sits alone, spooning sugar into her tea. RAJ enters, half-dressed for work, tie hanging loose.)

RAJ: You didn't sleep.

SINDY: *(quietly)* Houses don't sleep when peace walks out the door.

RAJ: She'll come back. She always does.

SINDY: *(staring at the empty chair)* Not this time.

(A silence.)

RAJ: You wanted order, Mum. You got it. Everything's neat, every bill paid. Only no one talks any more.

SINDY: *(hurt)* I wanted respect.

RAJ: Respect isn't fear. You taught her to fear silence. She learned it too well.

(SINDY looks at him sharply, then away.)

SINDY: You blame me?

RAJ: I blame us. We built this house like a business. We forgot to live in it.

(Door opens. SONIA enters, composed, dressed for work, calm. SINDY stiffens.)

SINDY: You came back.

SONIA: I live here. For now.

(She places her keys on the table, looks at the third teacup...untouched.)

SONIA: You made tea. That's kind.

SINDY: It's habit. Habits survive everything.

(SONIA sits opposite her. RAJ hovers, unsure where to stand.)

SONIA: I came to talk before leaving for the shops.

SINDY: About money?

SONIA: About peace.

(A pause.)

SONIA: You said last night that families don't survive three cards and two minds. Maybe they do. They just stop pretending it's one mind.

SINDY: *(tight voice)* You think independence is happiness?

SONIA: I think honesty is.

(SINDY's voice softens, the first sign of vulnerability.)

SINDY: I only wanted you safe. Everything I did was to keep this house standing.

SONIA: And it is. But you never noticed who held up the other half.

(RAJ lowers his head. SINDY watches SONIA, struggling between pride and understanding.)

SINDY: *(after a long pause)* You sound like me when I was young. I said the same to my husband once. He laughed. I stopped saying it.

SONIA: Maybe that's the difference between us. I won't stop.

(She stands, looks at both of them.)

SONIA: I'm not leaving because I'm angry. I'm leaving because I can breathe better when I'm not explaining myself.

(SINDY looks down, hands trembling slightly.)

SINDY: If you walk out now, people will talk.

SONIA: Let them. I've spent enough of my life keeping people comfortable.

(A silence. RAJ looks at her, helpless.)

RAJ: SONIA… can’t we start again?

SONIA: *(softly)* We can...but not from this table.

(She picks up her bag. SINDY reaches out but doesn’t touch her.)

SINDY: You’re strong, beta. I wish I had been.

(SONIA meets her gaze gently.)

SONIA: You still can be. Start by sitting somewhere else.

(SONIA exits. RAJ moves towards the empty chair, then stops. SINDY sits very still, staring at the space SONIA left behind. Slowly, she moves the untouched teacup to the centre of the table... a quiet offering, or surrender. She whispers almost to herself.)

SINDY: So much noise… for a woman who only wanted silence.

(RAJ looks at his mother. A pause. He says quietly, almost to himself)

RAJ: This is the house SONIA walked into. *(nods.)*

(Lights dim slowly until only the table remains visible...three cups, one gone cold, one empty, one in the middle...the echo of all that was said and all that couldn’t be.)

Blackout